
The Street-Level Politics of School Reform

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ABOUT THE CENTER ON REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

Through research and policy analysis, CRPE seeks ways to make public education more effective, especially for America's disadvantaged students. We help redesign governance, oversight, and dynamic education delivery systems to make it possible for great educators to do their best work with students and to create a wide range of high-quality public school options for families. Our work emphasizes evidence over posture and confronts hard truths. We search outside the traditional boundaries of public education to find pragmatic, equitable, and promising approaches to address the complex challenges facing public education. Our goal is to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America's schools. CRPE is a nonpartisan, self-sustaining organization affiliated with the University of Washington Bothell. Our work is funded through private philanthropic dollars, federal grants, and contracts.

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Introduction

Political scientist E.E. Schattschneider likened politics to a fight between two men in a street. If nobody intervenes, the stronger will win. But if the weaker fighter can get an observer to join in on his side, the dynamic changes. Neither of the original pugilists can control the results all by himself. As Schattschneider wrote, the ultimate result depends less on the strength of the original fighters than on the behavior of the crowd.

Individuals who were not engaged at the start will enter the fray or avoid it for their own reasons. The issues at stake can evolve as parties with different agendas join on one side or the other.

One former bystander might enter because he thinks a combatant is fighting dirty and he wants to defend the principle of fair play; another because he identifies with the race or religion of one of the combatants; another because he hopes to make off with one fighter's watch; another because a fighter promises to share the contents of his opponent's wallet with anyone who will join him, and so on.

These basic insights into the nature of political conflict explain much about contemporary education reform. Efforts to transform big-city school systems so they provide good schools and real choices for all children ultimately set off a struggle between those who want to change what government does and those who want to maintain the status quo. But like a street fight, the result of this struggle depends less on the fighters' good intentions or their initial strength than on the actions of individuals who might be convinced to join one side or the other.

This paper is a primer on the politics of school reform. It is based on the experience of civic and education leaders in key cities that have adopted a portfolio strategy. These cities, more than others, have changed how schools are funded, which providers are eligible to receive funds, and the distribution of power between unions, the central office, schools, and other stakeholders. The paper examines the political challenges that have emerged in cities pursuing the [portfolio strategy](#), and how city leaders overcame (or were overcome by) them. It is written for school superintendents and civic leaders who seek to change K–12 education in the future, and to help them anticipate the inevitable challenges and be prepared to manage—rather than be overwhelmed by—the politics.¹

We develop our ideas for reformers in three parts. First, we recount the political story of reform in five big-city school systems: New York City, New Orleans, Denver, Oakland, and Newark. In the second section we elaborate on Schattschneider's insights to interpret the stories of reform in these cities and explain the current state of play. Our analysis refutes a common belief among reformers that the key to success is to circumvent politics. In the third section, we draw the lessons provided by the cases and provide a theory for reformers seeking to leverage local politics to their advantage.

Sketches of Reform in Five Cities

Education reform creates pain points in politics and this is true of the portfolio strategy. The traditional local school district is a reliable employer and a stable provider of benefits to schools and neighborhoods whose leaders know how to influence school board and central office decision-making to gain access to resources. The portfolio strategy disrupts these arrangements—decentralizing power, redistributing funding, and changing the balance of power in favor of under-served families and new school providers who can serve them.

Given the entrenched arrangements that any reformer confronts, it is not surprising that the protagonists in these cities engaged in hard-fought struggles to get the changes to policies they sought. In some cases, reformers circumvented local political structures, enabling rapid implementation of their preferred policies. But, as we show, the future of the reformers' plans depended not on how successful they were in winning early battles, but rather on how they expanded their coalition beyond their initial supporters. As political scientist Eric Patashnik observes, public policies become sustainable when they create or mobilize groups with a stake in their continuation.

On the following page, we provide capsule summaries of reform politics in the five cities we profiled, which will provide raw material for analysis in later sections.² Summary requires simplification, and what follows gives less attention to the deeper motives—including helping children and making cities good places to live—that drove many of the players.

THUMBNAIL SKETCHES – Reform in Five Cities

New York City: Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his schools chancellor, Joel Klein, pressed for school autonomy, accountability, and replacement of failed schools with new charter- and district-run schools. Their work generated widespread support, but also opposition, and opponents won at least a temporary victory with the election of mayor Bill de Blasio in 2013. Since then, de Blasio has dismantled or sought to dismantle many of the Klein-era reforms.

New Orleans: After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the state took control of 65 low-performing schools in New Orleans. The state used its authority to terminate the employment contracts of teachers and turn over the operation of the schools to nonprofit charter organizations. While these actions generated much conflict among civil rights organizations, teachers, and the local school board, they also drew praise from the majority of the city's residents.

Newark: In 2010, the state of New Jersey used existing authorities to appoint Cami Anderson as superintendent of the Newark School District. Anderson committed to a mixed inside-outside reform strategy, opening charter schools and closing poorly performing, under-enrolled schools, while also trying to transform district-run schools by improving teacher training and talent pipelines. The reforms generated strong local opposition and by mid-2015, Anderson was politically isolated and resigned. The governor and mayor then created a new commission to discuss terms under which schools would be returned from state to local control.

Denver: In 2007, facing declining enrollment, Denver Public Schools superintendent Michael Bennet started creating new schools in neighborhoods where the district was losing students most rapidly, and working closely with Hispanic leaders in neighborhoods where schools were poorly matched to the needs of immigrant students. He also worked to improve career opportunities for teachers, ridding the district of seniority-based pay and instituting a value-added evaluation system. In 2009, Tom Boasberg succeeded Bennet, and went on to improve the freedom of action of the district's schools and to aggressively close poorly performing schools. In 2012, a new board was elected and Boasberg was given license to continue his reform strategy for the district. Reform in Denver continues, at a measured but consistent pace.

Oakland: In 2003, the state of California stepped in to take control of Oakland's school system after years of growing financial deficits, shrinking student enrollment, and stagnant performance. Randy Ward was appointed superintendent and sought to remake the district by improving accountability, giving schools more flexibility, and sponsoring new schools. Despite his extraordinary powers and freedom of action, the initiative and his tenure as superintendent ended in 2006 after the union launched a successful revolt. Reformers are now trying to build on what is left of what Ward built.

Lessons on the Politics of Reform

As the experience of reformers in these cities shows, local politics is neither a sideshow nor a barrier that can be avoided. Reform leaders never start out with all the support they need to make deep and lasting changes to the public school system. Would-be reformers need to attract individuals and groups to their side. They also need to overcome a status quo coalition of individuals and groups who benefit a lot from the current arrangements. To succeed, reformers need to attract bystanders into the fight and induce some members of the status quo coalition to switch sides.

This paper unpacks these broad generalizations into six specific lessons about how reformers can master the politics of reform:

- Community businesses, civic leaders, and advocacy organizations are a valuable first source of support for reformers but this elite support alone is not enough.
- Reformers need to broaden their basis of support over time to include parents and individuals not directly engaged with the schools, and cause some supporters of the status quo to switch sides.
- Reformers need to understand the politics of race and ethnicity and head off any efforts to associate school change initiatives with race or class oppression.
- Outside funders (e.g., national foundations) and power centers (e.g., the state government) can intervene to create temporary political advantages. But reformers still need to build working coalitions of local groups and individuals.
- Once reformers succeed in transforming a high proportion of local schools, they own mistakes and failures. These have real political consequences, causing defections from the reform coalition and strengthening opponents.
- Even when they are no longer dominant, groups that oppose reform won't give up. They too can bring in resources (e.g., union money) from the outside and appeal to friendly parts of the state and local governments, or to courts. Reformers must anticipate many cycles of conflict, not just one decisive fight.

The Value (and Limitations) of Elite Support

Local leaders in higher education, business, cultural institutions, and government are naturally concerned about their city's viability and are often the first to join the fight on the side of reformers. An appeal to traditional civic interests is an obvious first step toward building local support for reform.

Former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, himself a member of the civic elite, is a case in point. Though as mayor he was fully in charge of the schools, Bloomberg knew that he had to develop allies in the city, the state government, and foundations. Along with Chancellor Joel Klein, Bloomberg built high-level support for controversial changes to the city's school system, including school closures and central office restructuring. Influential supporters formed Learn NY, which included groups with close ties to the mayor, as well as charter school advocates and operators. Its membership included Geoffrey Canada, the social activist and leader of the Harlem's Children's Zone.

When Oakland’s superintendent Randy Ward was appointed, he immediately recognized that while the schools were in dire straits, Oakland had invaluable access to a robust local civic sector, fueled by strong traditions of citywide and neighborhood activism. Oakland also had major universities and nonprofits, and access to Silicon Valley wealth. Ward quickly acted to form a partnership with the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools, a local nonprofit with a track record of success helping existing schools and starting new ones. Many of the first new schools to open were managed by prominent community groups who had direct ties to the families and neighborhoods reformers were trying to serve. Working with these established groups built support among parents and neighborhood activists who were skeptical of Ward, a state-appointed outsider.

Cleveland mayor Frank Jackson had been nominally in control of the schools since he took office in 2005. But he committed publicly to a portfolio reform strategy only in 2013 after he and local foundations had laid a great deal of groundwork. A large group of young black and white professionals who had served on charter school boards provided a credible support base of people who believed that all public schools could become more supportive, personalized, and effective. This support base continued to grow as new school options gradually developed under Jackson’s portfolio-based “Cleveland Plan.”

Cleveland’s experience illustrates the breadth of the term “elites.” Though it can be equated with the old-time “city fathers”—guardians of the city’s business climate and economic base—elites now also include newly emerging ethnic professionals and business owners, leaders of left-leaning philanthropies and cultural groups, and women as well as men. Black professionals are emerging as key influencers in Detroit, Washington, D.C., and other cities besides Cleveland. Pro-reform elites in Houston now include Hispanic citizens who would not have been prominent or influential a decade ago.³

Reform leaders don’t need unanimous support from local influentials, but losing all elite support can be fatal. In Newark, when Mayor Cory Booker focused his attention on a run for the Senate, education reform in that city lost its local elite anchor. Superintendent Cami Anderson and State Commissioner of Education Christopher Cerf lacked ties to Newark and were left politically isolated.

While the support of elites can enable reformers to implement their strategies vigorously, it is rarely enough to counter the political conflicts that emerge in portfolio cities. Elites seldom have children in the public schools, so their concerns are more general—the health of the city—and they can decide that education reform is less central to their interests than other initiatives. Compared to groups that depend on the schools for their incomes, elites have weaker incentives to endure harsh conflict or make a stand against long odds.

Thus, in the long run, elite support is not a sufficient basis for a winning coalition. Elites can be early supporters and valuable opinion leaders, but reformers also need to draw parents, neighborhood leaders, professionals, and faith leaders to their side.

Turning Bystanders Into Allies

In any locality there are groups with real interests in public education who either are not engaged, grudgingly accepting of a bad deal, or only weakly attached to the status quo. Many families habitually support public education as an institution that launches people into civic society and the American mainstream. But if they don't currently have children in school, these families are seldom informed about current issues and problems. As studies by Public Agenda have shown since 1994, many parents and others who care about schools have accommodated to current levels of performance but would prefer something better if only they could see the way to get it.⁴

Of all the groups that reformers need to draw to their side, parents are the most indispensable but also the most challenging: indispensable because they are among the most affected by any reform, but challenging because parents are vastly more concerned about their own child's experience in school than about the performance of the broader system. Some parents who are intensely unhappy about their children's education have already given up on the public schools entirely and have chosen private schools. Public school parents who like their own child's school might be concerned about the quality of education offered to others—for example, poor and minority children—but they will fear initiatives that might have unpredictable consequences for their own child's school.

Parents are also free, as are voters in general, to ignore causal linkages. Just as voters can make inconsistent choices—guns and butter, tax cuts and service increases, safer streets and less intrusive policing—parents can favor better schools but oppose anything that reallocates resources or challenges teachers. In New York City, some parents delighted with the new small high schools also deplored the conflict-laden closings of large high schools whose facilities the small schools then occupied. In Denver and Oakland, middle-class parents successfully resisted strict enrollment-based funding of schools, fearing loss of a concentration of highly paid teachers and special programs in their neighborhood schools.

Once a portfolio strategy leads to the creation of new schools, parents in those schools are a natural source of support. They might be few in number to start, but their expressions of satisfaction can give comfort to elite supporters and provide a counterpoint to media stories about the harms of reform. In New York City, parents in new charter schools have proven essential allies against union resistance. In Denver, Michael Bennet worked with Hispanic groups that were unhappy with their current schools and with teachers who favored merit pay and better opportunities for career advancement. He also offered attractive choices for parents near the city borders, who had the advantage of an open enrollment policy to enroll children in schools run by suburban districts.

While these successes built credibility with Denver's active foundation and business communities, and with the mayor, they became sustainable through the support of parents and other voters who continually frustrated opposition efforts to elect an anti-reform board and toss Bennet and Boasberg out.⁵ Of all the cities profiled here, only

Denver never depended on a state takeover, mayoral control, or natural disaster, and has sustained the same leadership and strategy. There and elsewhere, a broad coalition anchored with support from both community members and local elites is the surest path toward lasting reform.⁶

Even when reform brings significant benefits to many families, it can cost others. In New York City and Chicago, new schools made possible by closing the worst schools created new opportunities for some students but forced others to shop among bad alternatives, often with longer commutes.⁷ The inevitable result was that some parents saw the value of the reform and others didn't. Divided parent opinion is hard to avoid in the early stages of a reform initiative, when some neighborhoods have improved schools and others haven't. The problem is even more severe when neighborhood schools are being closed and replaced by charter schools, to which admissions are governed by lottery. This was the case with charter elementary schools in New York City. Under those circumstances it was likely that some students who attended the old neighborhood school would have to search for someplace else to go. If they ended up in schools no better than those closed, their parents would see no reason to support the reform strategy.

Seeking a way to cement parental support, reform leaders in some cities are currently developing admissions processes that reserve seats in new schools for students that live nearby, but still allow those families to choose other schools. In Tennessee, incumbent school families are queried about the kinds of schools they prefer, and new school providers are chosen to match their preferences as closely as possible. In New Orleans, students affected by closures get priority access to good alternatives.

The resolution to challenges in gaining and keeping parent support is not straightforward. Controlling the narrative is important, especially given that media coverage can shape parents' perceptions of reform; the narrative that emerges is not always an accurate accounting of what happens, shaped by the need to highlight points of conflict and failures. Even a sophisticated communications strategy does not change the reality of the impact of closed schools and lost jobs. These are the ultimate pain points in portfolio cities and can only be addressed by ensuring that communities benefit more than they are harmed by reform.

This may mean proceeding deliberately with needed structural changes. This was Bennet and Boasberg's strategy in Denver. Their measured but steady approach—making change rapidly when possible but slowing down when opposition threatened to become overwhelming—sustained a reform that could be reversed by a change of one vote on the school board.

Local coalition builders can't be timid, but abrupt and "fundamentalist" initiatives can backfire. A sudden commitment to a one-dimensional reform strategy via only "growing the charter sector" invites questions about whether children not in charter schools will be hurt, and about whether the city will ultimately end up with two school systems, each undermined and weakened by the other.

Newark built some good new charter schools, and over time it could have used the demand they generated to justify continued expansion of the charter sector. But the absence of a complementary strategy to benefit children still in district schools made many parents and community groups uncomfortable.

Reformers also could do more to leverage existing sources of teaching and principal talent in local communities. Implementation of the portfolio strategy in Cleveland and Denver meant giving existing school leaders more autonomy. In New Orleans, there has been a renewed push to incubate more New Orleans-based charter schools and ensure existing schools are more representative of the students in the city's schools.

Coping with the Politics of Race and Ethnicity

Reformers often prefer what Jeffrey Henig has called an a-racial narrative in which school improvement is colorblind and all actions are understood only in terms of their effects on the quality of schools and the benefits for children. But racial politics can profoundly affect reformers' success and potential liabilities.⁸

Schools have historically been an important source of employment and political enfranchisement for minority communities. It was through the schools that many blacks entered the middle class by securing teaching positions in growing cities.⁹ And the local elected school board quickly became an important source of political power for minority communities long under-represented in state and local elected offices.¹⁰

Though the portfolio strategy aims to improve schools for historically disadvantaged groups, any effort to reform the schools can be interpreted through the lens of racial politics. As Henig describes, opponents of reform can (and often do) leverage historic narratives about race and class in their favor by claiming reform is just the latest grab for power by whites and minority middle-class allies.¹¹ The history of systemic discrimination, exclusion, or expropriation by whites in cities across the United States make these narratives compelling and influential, regardless of whether they are based in truth. In Chicago, for example, black members of the education reform coalition must always work to convince parents and voters that it is not just another instance of white leaders trying to drive blacks out of the city—the perceived goal of the 1970s destruction of huge public housing projects and a source of resentment over ongoing gentrification of city neighborhoods. Reformers in other cities with long histories of racial polarization and recent experiences with gentrification (e.g., Washington, D.C., Detroit, and Philadelphia) will face similar challenges.

Even in less racially polarized cities, opponents can try to redefine a school reform initiative as an effort, for example, to make the money appropriated for schools available to business, to maintain white advantage by ruining schools for minorities, or even to improve the schools so much that whites (and middle-class professional minorities) will want to return to them, driving out lower-income minorities. Reformers can find these interpretations shocking and perverse, but they are real concerns and cannot be waved away. As Henig notes, reformers' preference for the language of markets and investment (e.g., portfolios, market share, disruption,

entrepreneurship, charter sector growth, creative destruction) can reinforce negative class- and race-based interpretations of reform.

But racial politics do not always have their roots in historic patterns of oppression and discrimination. Like other citizens, blacks and Hispanics are not just parents and grandparents but also church members, residents of neighborhoods, teachers or friends or relatives of teachers, business owners or employees, taxpayers, and members of political parties.

Multiple group memberships can lead to mixed and conflicting views on school reform initiatives.¹² A parent or grandparent who is a teacher or a teacher's relative, or attends a church where teachers are prominent members of the congregation, or who lives in a neighborhood where schools might be closed, will look at school change from more than one perspective.

Thus, minority citizens can be difficult to mobilize on behalf of changing the schools.¹³ This can be true even if local reform leaders themselves are black or Hispanic. Reform leaders whose race or ethnicity matches that of minority parents might have an advantage if they are highly skillful, trusted, and determined, as was Cleveland mayor Frank Jackson. But, in the cities we studied, leaders' ethnic identity mattered less than their skill, vision, and ability to make their case and inspire trust.¹⁴

The core strategy for managing racial politics is to ensure that reform benefits students in historically underserved communities and to clearly communicate these results to families. Reform leaders like Joel Klein in New York City and Michael Bennet in Denver understood that such explanations get more attention and are more credible when coming from trusted members of the minority community. This is why minority elites are indispensable members of any local reform coalition.¹⁵

However, even if a parent thinks the reform initiative is improving children's schooling, he or she can think that it is doing harm in other ways. If the perceived benefits to students are slight or uncertain, but perceived harms to other concerns are major and immediate, a parent can stay on the sidelines or even join opponents. Cami Anderson's promise of better schools was too distant a reality to allay the concerns of community members about the loss of middle-class jobs in the school district.

As is evident in New Orleans, Newark, and Chicago, members of the minority community can join the opposition if they see reform actions as mainly harmful. Thus, Chicago's closing high schools and making no provisions for the students set adrift are naturally coded as negative. Newark's wholesale reduction of employment in the traditional schools and district central office and slow rate of improvement also strengthened opposition among parents, grandparents, and ordinary voters, convincing many that the reform did more harm than good. Teacher firings in New Orleans created a substantial minority group of black voters who believed the financial harm done by firing thousands of teachers undermined the economic base of the black community, hurting children more than school improvements have helped them.

As a result, reform leaders also need to recognize the ways that school change initiatives can affect minority communities and work harder to mitigate any negative impacts. Any action that takes something away from a neighborhood, group of teachers, or even from businesses that once benefited from district patronage, can affect the minority community's calculus of support. Some perceived harms might be unavoidable, including school closures, terminating the least effective teachers and principals, or reducing central office employment and contracting. But these should be done carefully, only when necessary, and with explanations of the offsetting benefits.

Families need to know that students in schools up for closure will get much better opportunities, and that schools are stronger when they don't have to support unproductive teachers, bureaucrats, or contractors. On the other hand, reform leaders need to avoid creating the impression that they are eager to get rid of all local minority educators and replace them with white educators from elsewhere. Though charter schools in New Orleans hired many locally trained black educators, some citizens viewed the widely publicized recruitment of Teach for America volunteers and New Teacher Project recruits as evidence that only outsiders were welcome. Since this can't be true—no major city can attract enough outsiders to staff all its schools—reformers should make sure to call attention to efforts to find educators locally and to improve the local talent pipeline.

While these offsets will never be enough to neutralize all opposition, some voters will be open to evidence about how much harm was really done and whether some efforts have been made to mitigate it. In the case of New Orleans, it is noteworthy that reformers have made little of the fact that 40 percent of teachers now working in the city were employed there before Hurricane Katrina.¹⁶

In the short or long run, a narrative equating an education reform strategy with a renewal of white or middle class dominance is a showstopper. Reform leaders can't prevent political entrepreneurs from trying out such narratives. But they can do more to make the narrative implausible, including ensuring that students demonstrably benefit from changes in the schools and paying attention to the consequences of reform actions on minority communities.

Weakening the Status Quo Coalition

All coalitions include supporters who range in the intensity with which they support or benefit from their group's position. This variability creates an opportunity to appeal to opponents who are less intensely committed to the status quo and who may stand to benefit under an alternative regime.

In K–12 education, there is a potential conflict of interest between the groups that benefit the most from the status quo—particularly the experienced teachers with senior teacher protections in existing collective bargaining agreements, and families in the district's "best" neighborhoods and schools—and other teachers and parents.¹⁷

In New York City, Joel Klein appealed to junior teachers by giving principals the freedom to fill teacher vacancies without respect to seniority. In Denver, Michael Bennet appealed to junior teachers with a new program of performance-based pay. Randy Ward made similar appeals in Oakland.

Though the status quo coalition can be weakened, it is unlikely to dissolve entirely. Unions, central office employees, and parents in privileged neighborhoods have much to lose under portfolio-style reforms, so they are far more likely to remain organized and continue resisting.

Sometimes reformers can use negative messaging to put pressure on the status quo coalition and detach members from it. Few parents or business leaders know that disadvantaged children often fall further behind the longer they are in school, or that schools serving the disadvantaged often have the least experienced teachers and suffer the highest rates of teacher turnover. Except in districts that have adopted pupil-based funding, no one, not even district leaders, knows how the concentration of senior teachers in schools serving more affluent children results in fewer resources going to schools serving low-income children.¹⁸ News media and public education activists tend to overlook these facts, but they represent wedge issues that can split off parent and civic groups and reduce the dominant coalition with its core union and allied parent constituencies.

In most cities, reformers can cite statistics such as high school graduation rates, SAT scores, and overall college readiness as the basis for a call to action.¹⁹ Publicizing these facts gained New York City leaders support for actions previously considered impossible, for example, closing high schools with storied pasts and sentimental alumni. These facts also built acceptance for new charter elementary schools dedicated to serving at-risk groups.

Reformers can also demonstrate how much money is being misspent, and what better alternatives are possible. Even showing how pupil-based funding enables school principals to greatly increase the number of dollars to support instruction can make both a positive case for the reform and a negative one against the old system.

Local leaders need to be transparent about evidence of low productivity and wasteful spending. In Newark, reform leaders crafted their plan in secret and little was said about the century of corruption that plagued the district well before the state or Cami Anderson stepped in to take control. “Outing” waste doesn’t force reformers to fix all the misspending problems at once. But it creates a narrative that voters will come to understand. It can also become someone else’s cause, for example, the city government or taxpayer groups, so education leaders don’t have to work the problem alone.

There are, of course, risks to negative messaging. Defenders will try to paint critics of the status quo as enemies of public education. To anticipate this, reformers in New York, Denver, and Cleveland took the initiative, asserting that reducing waste and inefficiency meant that the city could do much better for its children.

The Value and Limits of Foundation Money and State Intervention

State intervention (including mayoral takeovers, which must be authorized by the state) can strengthen some local actors and thereby tilt the local balance of power in favor of change. It can allow reformers to put in place favorable leaders, to temporarily neutralize the opposition's power, and ultimately enable the passage of policies that would otherwise be impossible to put into place. But in the end, these changes can only be made permanent and sustainable if they find local political support.

In this sense, state takeovers are not akin to military occupations, meant to root out opposition once and for all. Even in New Orleans, where after Katrina state officials at first worked virtually free of opposition, local politics returned as quickly as the residents did. State takeovers amount to a marginal addition to one side in a local fight. Moreover, as happened in New Orleans, state interventions can also facilitate opponents' efforts to interpret school reform issues in racial terms.²⁰ Reformers therefore cannot expect the state to sweep away all that came before it. If newly strengthened local actors are passive or misplay their hands, the opportunity for change can be lost and taint local reformers over the long term.

The state of Louisiana's instrument, the Recovery School District (RSD), would not have been sustained if all the credible local institutions had opposed it. The RSD has a great deal of legal authority—it can seize control of failing schools anywhere in the state—but it hasn't been effective in cities where local opposition outweighed local support.

Cities' experiences with state-authorized mayoral control (e.g., Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, and Cleveland) and other forms of state takeover (e.g., Philadelphia, Central Falls, R.I., Prince George's County, MD, and Compton, CA) are revealing in that there are at least as many cases in which the status quo remained unchanged (or bounced back after a little while) as where school systems were transformed. Even in cities where state action ultimately led to serious reform, there have been lags: it took Cleveland nearly 20 years after the state put the mayor in charge until reform got moving, and the jury is still out on what will happen in Philadelphia due to the still-ongoing struggles set off by the state takeover in 2001.

State takeovers can also crash. Oakland schools changed quickly under state-appointed administrator Randy Ward. But he was gone and many of his initiatives dismantled by the end of 2006. Ward was a good superintendent and a smart public official, but he was an outsider in Oakland with a constituency of one, the state superintendent.

In Newark, reform ideas, people, and energy were imported: authority from the state, leadership from New York City, money from California, and experts from everywhere. If these things had come in response to local demand, even a skillfully engineered one, they might have been seen as assets. But since they were all clearly imposed, local political figures who might have disagreed about many things found it to their advantage to unite against people and actions imposed from outside.²¹

Though the Newark story is complex, the loss of a potent local leader was probably the most important single event. State officials and experienced reformers from out of town can implement reforms on a day-to-day basis but they need people who know the city and are known in it to build coalitions, judge risks, and recognize when to speed up or slow down.

Even when a state takeover has strong local buy-in, support for state interventions often declines over time, as crises fade from view. In New Orleans, surveys by the Cowen Institute document a sustained decline in public support for continued state control in the years after Katrina.²²

Denver is the one large city that initiated a major reform without some form of state intervention. There, local reform leaders had smaller political advantages at the beginning, and had to build momentum over time. It started with an ambitious superintendent, who saw and then worked to convince others that the district would fail financially unless it managed to attract families who fled city schools for those in nearby districts. Subsequently, state legislation strengthened the reformers' hands by creating a new class of autonomous public schools. But Denver's reform model has persisted mainly because it generated local allies who have buttressed it over time.

Foundation money, like Marc Zuckerberg's \$100 million investment in Newark (or the nearly half-billion the Annenberg Foundation poured into cities in the early 1990s) can feed supporters, but it is unlikely to create a stable reform coalition. Individuals and groups that can be "bought" are likely to switch again. As ward-healers in the early twentieth century knew, they could buy a vote but not loyalty.

Huge foundation gifts meant to jump-start reform can fail because 1) the funders have attached themselves to enthusiasts who ignore politics, move too fast and dramatically, and run everything into the ground, or 2) local figures promise to declare a bold reform and push it at great speed, but do not have the stature or political skill to sustain it.

The amounts of money available can also distort reformers' priorities. In Oakland, the district's reform plan hinged in large part on foundations paying one-time costs for designing capacities and building the necessary support organizations. Major national philanthropies donated over \$12 million to support new data systems, schools, and accountability mechanisms. But the investments also swamped the district's management capacity and resulted in money being spent in ways that were inconsistent with the portfolio reform strategy.

In Newark, the Zuckerberg gift paid for consultants and some good new charter schools. But it also made the city a target for anti-reform activists based elsewhere, and it deluded local leaders into thinking they could buy more than a moment's peace with labor with \$30 million of Zuckerberg's dollars. As this example shows, in the presence of big money, the price of the support (or acquiescence) can rise to consume and exceed the funding available.

Reformers need access to money, but grants should build capacities to improve schools and to found local organizations that will support school improvement, provide parent

information, and gather evidence on results. Foundations should not pay school or district operating expenses or buy the district out of a financial crisis that is certain to reappear as soon as the outside money is spent.

Too often, money from outside groups is used to support outsiders who have little claim to belong to the city. The bad optics in Newark were driven in no small part by the fact that few local community groups benefited from the infusion of cash.²³

Gifts with focused capacity-building goals—for example, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s 2004 gifts to promote development of the New Visions nonprofit and district-created new high schools in New York, and gifts from various foundations to support development of New Orleans charter management organizations—can help reformers deliver on their promises.

Money can also help beneficiaries of reform—parent groups, principals and teachers who have gained greater freedom of action, and civic coalitions—organize and make their cases. These kinds of groups are more effective in local politics than statewide or national groups that pursue agendas constructed elsewhere.

Taking Control Creates New Liabilities

When the originally weaker party starts to win, some liabilities pass to it from its once-stronger adversary. Bystanders who tolerated a little dirty fighting by the underdog might not be so accepting of the same methods when the formerly weaker party becomes the stronger.

The way the newly stronger party conducts itself can bring in new opponents, actors offended by its methods or just inclined to support the underdog. In addition, supporters of the now-stronger side can become disappointed in the results and withdraw. Fighters who joined the reform side can lose confidence, leave the fight, and exercise their interest in education in other ways, for example, by sending children to private schools or supporting the improvement of individual schools, not the whole system.²⁴ Groups that got control of schools or other resources via the reform can abuse their opportunities or fail to perform. The political advantage can switch back and forth unless the now-stronger party gives its supporters reasons to stay engaged and gives the audience reasons not to come out in support of its now-weaker adversary.

In New York City today, the status quo coalition is resurgent, less because the reforms introduced by Klein and Bloomberg didn’t work as promised, but more because they annoyed and energized previously inactive parties. Union opposition was a constant, but when middle-class parents became annoyed about having to share facilities with charter schools, the old coalition became much stronger. New mayor Bill de Blasio had campaigned against co-locations and promised to cut charter schools’ access to public school facilities.

Despite de Blasio’s power as mayor, however, pro-reform groups have been able to bring a new factor in on their side, New York governor Andrew Cuomo, to stymie efforts to roll back charter schools.²⁵ At this point it is too soon to say whether de

Blasio can do more than slow down the reform initiatives started under Bloomberg, and whether a subsequent city administration will reinstate reform as its core policy.

In New Orleans, the reform initiated in 2005 continues, despite a growing but still fragmented opposition coalition of unions, the Orleans Parish School Board, and nonprofit businesses that once worked for the traditional district. The pro-reform alliance of the New Orleans business, higher education, and foundation communities can rely on the state government to keep the political balance favorable to them. However, a change in the governorship could seriously weaken the pro-reform coalition.

The Louisiana Recovery School District has the authority to work statewide, and reformers had hoped to take over schools in cities other than New Orleans. However, opposition from school boards and state legislators in Shreveport, Lafayette, and other Louisiana cities proved too great: reformers found they could not succeed if they spread the street fight to other localities. Status quo coalitions in the other cities stayed neutral when the fight was contained within New Orleans. But they showed their muscle by forcing the resignation of state superintendent Paul Pastorek, who had talked openly about using the RSD's powers in other localities.

When reformers succeed in transforming local schools, they own the school system's results, and their actions can both confirm support and energize opposition. Scandals and misuses of funds, as well as performance failures, can all threaten their support. As the experience of all the cities profiled for this paper shows, something inevitably goes wrong. The reform can be insulated to a degree by leaders' initial explanation: No city has fully solved the problem of serving disadvantaged urban children, it is necessary to experiment with new approaches, and not all these will succeed. However, that obligates leaders to be the first to identify failures and say, before they are asked, what will be done next.

Reform leaders in Denver and New Orleans have survived failures by getting ahead of critics and refusing to defend the indefensible. New Orleans leaders have closed some schools they had opened, and addressed issues with special education and discipline head on. The intense political climate in New York made this more difficult to do, but Klein and his team had many successes, so they could admit some failures.

Of course, too much failure will bring anyone down. Reform leaders need to act carefully when they choose new charter school providers or designate district principals to lead autonomous schools. Leaders in New Orleans and Denver brought in a high-quality review team led by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers to screen applicants. This led to a high success rate among new schools, but also disappointed some local supporters who had hoped for, but did not win, the chance to operate their own schools.

Finally, reform leaders must also understand that the people who lead individual schools and make money providing services are out to succeed on their own terms, and might act in ways that undermine the reform. Some charter schools can try to cherry-

pick students and offload expensive-to-educate students, or “game” student achievement testing. Some service providers can try to exclude competition so they can charge more and deliver less. These phenomena occur in traditional public school systems, too, but reform leaders can’t afford to just assume that things will work out because the “right” people are in charge. They need to watch data, ask a lot of questions, and act against anyone who is cheating students or the schools.

Preparing for Opponents’ Comeback

Over time, status quo defenders can become the weaker party in local politics, but they won’t quit. In most sports, even professional boxing, the contest ends at a specified point. That’s not so for street fights, which can go on for a long time and the advantage can ebb and flow. As we show in *Strife and Progress*, reformers in many, if not all, communities are likely to experience setbacks and be forced back into the underdog role, at least occasionally.²⁶

Status quo groups can also recruit new allies and raise money. As portfolio strategies have made headway in many cities, unions and their coalition partners have recruited new supporters both nationally and locally, sought intervention by courts and investigative agencies, and introduced national money into local politics. For example:

- New York mayoral candidate Bill de Blasio appealed to middle-class parents who opposed placement of charter schools into under-occupied school buildings. This group, with core status quo supporters, buttressed the new mayor’s efforts to deny free space to new charter schools.²⁷
- National teachers unions sponsored school board candidates who pledged to halt portfolio strategy implementation in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, in 2014. Though not all union candidates were elected, new union board members drove out the superintendent and key aides.
- Unions and other opponents to the RSD in New Orleans recruited the Annenberg Institute (Brown University) to help organize diffuse community sentiment into a more united resistance front. Annenberg has also intervened in New York City, helping build opposition to Bloomberg-era reforms.
- National teachers unions provided money and communications advice to mobilize opposition to charter schools and other elements of the “One Newark” plan. Arguments against the “billionaire boys club” were imported from New York City.
- The Oakland Education Association sought support from state labor organizations to demand the firing of state administrator Randy Ward. In spring 2006, the state superintendent pushed Ward out of the job.

In taking these actions, reform opponents took advantage of their historic national alliances and capitalized on local reformers’ liabilities. Nothing can prevent opponents from using the resources they have, but reformers needn’t admit defeat as soon as the other side gains new assets. Counter-organization and outreach to groups who will benefit from reform (particularly parents of children doing least well in the

conventional school system) can counter opponents' initiatives. So can quick action to solve problems that opponents can capitalize on. New Orleans provides the best example of this. When the Southern Poverty Law Center brought suit against RSD charter schools for gaps in special education and problems with student discipline, charter groups and New Schools for New Orleans addressed these problems through new cooperative agreements that improved fairness and transparency citywide.

Implications for Key Actors

The observations explained above will be old hat to some but news to others. K–12 leaders trained in schools of education and apprenticed as teachers and principals are not taught to think politically. Even when business and political leaders take on school reform, they are often unprepared for the level of opposition and obstruction they will face, and for the need to defeat opponents by building new coalitions. We have discussed the special challenges of city-level reform leadership separately.²⁸

These observations have implications for actors other than city-level leaders, for example, state officials, local and national philanthropies.

State officials

Understand that your intervention can tip the balance locally, but it can't anoint anyone as the permanent winner.

When state takeover is inevitable, recruit local leaders who can make it work in a local context. State leaders can also use a credible threat of state takeover to strengthen the hands of local reformers.

Understand that reform takes place against a background of state laws. If the default setting of state laws is contrary to the reform strategy (e.g., against pupil-based funding, controls schools' use of time, money, and methods), local reformers will always be running uphill. Ask how state statutes and policies can normalize what reformers are trying to do.²⁹

If you must take over a district or city's schools, have a strategy for returning the schools to reform-oriented local leadership in a finite time. The person first put in charge of a state takeover can be an outsider, but a leader for the long run must know the city and be able to work its politics. The person needn't (probably shouldn't) be the one that the local status quo coalition would select. But he or she needs to be able to build a strong coalition of local supporters.

Philanthropies

Don't expect to get a permanent result by supporting a man on horseback. Also don't expect to buy a lasting political change with a one-time grant. Local politics will kick back. Philanthropies can join or strengthen a coalition in favor of reform, but they can't expect to make a difference if their only local ally is a willing but politically naive superintendent, or a teachers union that has been pacified for a few months with a grant.

Understand that supporting proofs of excellence (e.g., local charter schools that work well) is the first step in a long journey. As Immanuel Kant and a slate of education reformers have written, “The actual proves the possible.” Opponents will want to isolate any successes and treat them as exceptions, not as examples of what can be done citywide. Foundations and their local partners need a strategy for building on initial successes, and building a compelling vision of how children would benefit if the whole system changes.

Support capacity-building that can help institutionalize a culture of reform within the walls of district central offices and schools. This might include investments in new forms of training and recruitment for local leaders. Or it might involve supporting the development of systems that modernize [enrollment systems](#) or performance accountability.

Invest heavily in homegrown talent and community leaders. Support local community engagement efforts—talking with parents in neighborhoods that are ill-served by the current system, exposing parent and neighborhood groups to examples of good schools made possible by similar reforms elsewhere, and engaging with civic leaders who know the city well—to build understanding of local challenges, inform strategy, and create opportunities for coalition building.

Understand that speed can kill by turning potential allies into opponents: press local leaders for steady progress, but don’t abandon a reform initiative that (like Denver’s) moves steadily but avoids dramatic leaps.

Conclusion

All the foregoing relies on Schattschneider’s metaphor of the street fight. Here’s another metaphor that provides a valuable perspective on education reform: as Max Weber wrote, politics is the strong and slow boring of hard boards. It takes time and involves setbacks. Enemies come back, and a side that looks on top today can be down tomorrow. Ultimately, policy success depends as much on political savvy as the strength of ideas. The experience of the five cities profiled here can guide reformers and sustain reforms that might otherwise fail to do more than scratch the surface.

Appendix I: Reform Politics in Five Cities

New York City

After winning a landslide election in 2001, Mayor Michael Bloomberg sought state legislation that eliminated the elected school board and allowed him to run the school system. Bloomberg hired as schools chancellor Joel Klein, a nationally prominent Democrat and an attorney who had both a strong record of public sector leadership and a Rolodex linking him to the most capable business and nonprofit leaders in the city. Klein assembled a team of lawyers and foundation staff, mixed with a few educators, to take over the school system and bypass most of the traditional bureaucracy.

Over an eight-year period, Klein transformed the relationship between the city system and individual schools: the system exercised less control over schools, which gained control over significant amounts of money and staff selection. In return, schools were held accountable for student performance, and schools with weak results (e.g., low test scores, course completion, graduation rates, rates of gain) and negative climate could be closed and their buildings offered to other providers, including charter schools. Klein enabled schools to hire independent providers for teacher training and other services traditionally provided by the central bureaucracy. He made publicly owned facilities available to new schools, whether operated by district employees or charter management organizations. He also eliminated community school districts (CSDs), which were known for being corrupt, patronage-driven institutions.

Klein pushed for rapid change, hoping positive results for children would overcome opposition. Though results were generally positive (especially for new high schools), opposition grew. (For a review of pre- and post-reform school performance in New York City, see Paul T. Hill's 2013 guest article in *The Atlantic*, "[Bloomberg's Education Plan Is Working, Don't Ditch It.](#)") The teachers union, middle-class families who resented loss of control of neighborhood school buildings, community groups who lamented the loss of CSDs, and liberals who objected to charter schools united in opposition, first to limit Bloomberg's powers and then to elect a new mayor, Bill de Blasio, who had opposed many parts of Bloomberg's program. The successful mayoral campaign found a new theme, resisting the "billionaire boys club" (including Bill Gates and Michael Bloomberg) who, it was claimed, wanted to turn public schools over to big business. But when de Blasio acted to reverse some of Bloomberg and Klein's programs, such as co-location of charter and district schools and assistance with facilities, he met stiff resistance from charter families, who protested in Albany.

It is not yet clear whether the new mayor will be able to reverse, or simply impose a hiatus on, the changes Bloomberg and Klein started. While de Blasio backed away from his showdown with charter schools in large part because of the political organization of the charter community, the elimination of performance accountability for schools met much resistance.

New Orleans

After Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, Louisiana governor Kathleen Blanco used a pre-existing state authority to take over and operate or charter-out persistently low-performing schools anywhere in the state. Prior to the storm, Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) was widely viewed as corrupt and plagued by financial mismanagement and the board did not actively resist the state takeover. The state's Recovery School District (RSD) took over 65 very low-performing schools in New Orleans, leaving only 20 to be overseen by the existing OPSB. (The 65 schools were closed at the time, most uninhabitable due to storm damage and with teachers and students scattered throughout the country.) The state also used a newly enacted statute as authority to terminate the employment contracts of teachers whose schools were taken over by the RSD. As a result, OPSB was forced to fire 4,000 teachers.

After a few months of slow progress (restoration of a few school buildings, slow return of students), attorney Paul Pastorek became state superintendent of schools and hired former Chicago and Philadelphia schools CEO Paul Vallas to head the RSD. Together they set out to use chartering as their main method of reopening schools, and to attract school leaders and teachers (including large numbers from Teach for America) from across the country. KIPP Houston, where many New Orleans students had enrolled after the storm, opened schools in New Orleans, as did newly formed groups, including some led by expatriate New Orleanians who had returned home. Over the years, as the city population rebounded and additional schools were needed, many were started as charters run by non-native teachers who had moved to work in New Orleans schools. Local black groups sought charters, but most were rejected under the strict criteria set by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, which the state had hired to help screen applications.

The few teachers union leaders who returned early to New Orleans opposed the process of firing teachers, creating charter schools, and hiring teachers from new sources. They gained support from outside the city, particularly the Annenberg Institute of Brown University and the broader anti-charter movement. Teachers fired in 2005 sued the state for reinstatement and lost wages; they won in local courts but could lose in the state Supreme Court.

New local groups complained about the low number of charters won by blacks and pressed for the state to put all schools back under the OPSB. State leaders (the governor, Legislature and the State Board of Education) did not satisfy these demands. However, Paul Pastorek was forced to resign after he threatened to take over schools in several other cities, which excited opposition among state legislators. There is a new state superintendent (John White) and RSD head (Patrick Dobard) but the 65 schools, now all chartered, remain under state oversight.

The movement toward a fully chartered system brought new challenges, including a complicated enrollment process, gaps in special education services, and problems with school discipline, which led to frustration for parents and a lawsuit by the Southern Poverty Law Center. By 2012, the RSD moved to address these problems through new centralized policies that sought to improve fairness and transparency systemwide.

In a 2013 Cowen Institute survey, 65 percent of parents supported turning failing schools over to charter schools and 50 percent agreed school choice had improved the quality of education in the city. (For evidence of broad public belief that New Orleans schools have improved, see the Cowen Institute’s 2015 report, *K-12 Public Education Through the Public’s Eye: Parents’ and Adults’ Perceptions of Public Education in New Orleans*.) Yet, the status of the RSD remained an open question, with the public largely divided on whether RSD schools should be returned to OPSB.

Newark

In 2010, the state of New Jersey used existing authorities to take over the Newark schools. Mayor Cory Booker fully supported the takeover and became a spokesman and political counselor on its behalf. State superintendent Christopher Cerf hired Cami Anderson, with whom he had worked under Joel Klein in New York City, as superintendent. With advice from Cerf, Booker, and key Newark business leaders, Anderson committed to a mixed inside-outside reform: opening new charters and closing the existing schools that were least productive and most under-enrolled, while also trying to transform existing district-run schools, improve teacher training, and promote the best internal talent.

National foundations lined up to support charter school creation and encourage new teachers to relocate to Newark. Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook billionaire born in New Jersey, also pledged \$100 million to support the reform. Decision-making about how to use the Zuckerberg gift was complicated. Ultimately, one-third went to pay teachers’ claims for back wages and merit pay, and approximately half of the remainder went toward charter school start-ups and changes in the district central office. Anderson, not an experienced political leader, relied on Booker for advice. She sought an alliance with the principal of Newark’s Central High School and black community leader Ras Baraka, hoping he would become a prominent supporter of her “One Newark” plan.

Opposition to reform in Newark was initially tempered. According to a 2011 report by a research collaborative between New York University and Rutgers, a majority of respondents to a community survey agreed with proposals to close schools with low achievement, replace principals of low-performing schools, provide merit pay, and open new charter schools.

In 2013, Booker started campaigning for a vacant U.S. Senate seat and paid less attention to Newark. State superintendent Chris Cerf also resigned in frustration about local districts’ resistance to change. The teachers union opposed the reform plan because of lost teacher jobs in closed schools and opposition to charters, which the union claimed were run by outsiders, mostly white, and disrespectful of the community. Union organizers and money came to Newark from New York and other cities, and arguments against the “billionaire boys club” were imported from New York City.

Though Ras Baraka privately supported some of the changes Cami Anderson went after, including merit pay for teachers, he ultimately chose to capitalize on growing opposition to One Newark and run for mayor. On the campaign, he condemned One

Newark for ignoring the needs of the community. Members of her original advisory group urged Anderson to delay planned changes in the schools, but she refused, citing the desperate needs of children.

By September 2014, Anderson was described as bereft of support but still in her job and insisting that she would execute the One Newark plan. New mayor Ras Baraka made the case that the mayor, not the state, would be better poised to fix the city's schools. Anderson resigned in June 2015, and a diverse and possibly divided panel of state and local officials took on the job of improving the schools.

Denver

Michael Bennet, an attorney, investment analyst, and former chief of staff for Mayor Bret Hickenlooper, became superintendent in 2005. Recognizing that declining enrollment in the city schools could soon lead to bankruptcy, he sought to stabilize finance and enrollment. He worked with reformist leaders of the Denver Teachers Association to create a merit pay plan that decoupled teacher pay from seniority, and sought to create attractive new schools in neighborhoods that were losing students to neighboring districts. He worked closely with Hispanic leaders to close existing schools and create new ones in neighborhoods where schools and teaching staffs were poorly matched to the needs of immigrant students. He also brought Denver into a new statewide value-added assessment system, the Colorado Growth Model, which could readily identify schools where students were learning at unusually high or low rates.

Bennet left in 2009 to fill a vacant U.S. Senate seat. Tom Boasberg, a close associate, succeeded him. Boasberg pressed for aggressive use of the Colorado Growth Model, and used results to identify schools for re-staffing or closure and replacement by charters. He also introduced a student-based funding policy, which reduced inequities in funding and came close to equalizing the funding received by charter- and district-run schools. Boasberg also worked with state legislators to enact an innovative schools bill, which increased schools' freedom of action *vis. a vis.* the district central office.

Unlike the other local reform initiatives profiled above, Denver's has been built with an elected school board in place. Bennet and Boasberg worked with one-vote majorities for most of their time in office, and have timed their moves and picked their battles. A strong pro-reform nonprofit and foundation sector has lent support, as has the growing number of families using charter schools. Hickenlooper, formerly mayor and now governor, and key state legislators have done what they could in support. The local teachers union, allies for the enactment of merit pay, has gone into opposition and run school board candidates pledged to fire Boasberg if elected. Many observers expected Boasberg's firing after the election of a new mayor and school board in 2012. However, new mayor Michael Hancock has joined and strengthened the reform coalition, and Boasberg now has a comfortable majority on the school board. By mid-2014, Boasberg had enough political capital to release a new strategic plan for the district, a follow-up on the reform plan launched by his predecessor in 2005.

Oakland

In Oakland, the state of California stepped in to take control of the city's school system in 2003 after years of growing financial deficits, shrinking student enrollment, and stagnant performance. Randy Ward, who had served successfully as state administrator in Compton, was appointed state administrator with all the powers of the superintendent and school board.

Ward sought to create a whole new school district in which everything—the use of money, control of schools, hiring of teachers, professional development, accountability, and central office services—was redesigned for maximum effect on student learning. The new state-run Oakland district was intended to promote school-level initiative and problem solving, but to make schools' freedoms contingent on performance. In order not to be stuck with a school that was not improving, the district would be armed with many possible interventions, including replacing a school with a new one.

Many of the new schools first to open were managed by prominent community groups or experienced charter school operators. The Broad, Gates, Casey, and Dell foundations provided more than \$12 million to develop all the new systems, schools, and management capacities listed above.

Though Ward possessed extraordinary powers and freedom of action, the initiative was affected by normal urban politics. Schools in the wealthier areas of Oakland, which would lose money if funds were redistributed on a strict per-pupil basis, were able to get special funding to allow them to keep their teaching staffs. The teachers union refused to believe that the district had come clean about its finances and mounted a successful strike, gaining significant salary increases, a return of placement preferences for senior teachers, and a reduction of principals' freedoms. The union also demanded Ward's firing and in the spring of 2006, the state superintendent, threatened with loss of union support for his re-election, pushed Ward out of the job.

Later in 2006, Ward went on to take a position at the San Diego County School District. The state superintendent appointed a cautious new administrator and eventually returned control to the local school board in 2009. By 2010, most of Ward's initiatives had been incrementally eroded, though some vestiges of the pupil-based funding and new-schools strategies remained.

Endnotes

1 A companion piece to this paper analyzes all the tasks a portfolio strategy CEO or superintendent must perform, and the ways aspiring leaders can prepare themselves. This paper looks more deeply into the politics of reform. It also addresses a broader audience of pro-reform community leaders, including elected officials and heads of foundations, as well as portfolio strategy CEOs. The earlier paper: Paul T. Hill and Shannon Murtagh, *The Portfolio Strategy CEO: The Job and How to Prepare For It* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2015).

2 The five cities are among more than forty-five that CRPE has studied since 2009 for an initiative on the portfolio strategy. We focus this paper on these five because their local politics were clear and well documented, but we bring other cities into the analysis from time to time because they provide elaborations or exceptions to our main points. Though school reform results are slightly positive in most of these cities, we use them as examples of political dynamics, not as ideal models of effectiveness. For broader analysis of the implementation and effectiveness of big-city portfolio strategies, see Paul T. Hill, Christine Campbell, and Betheny Gross, *Strife and Progress: Portfolio Strategies for Managing Urban Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2013); see chapter 6 for a cross-city analysis of effects of reform on student outcomes. Also see [CRPE's data on portfolio implementation in these and more than 30 additional cities](#).

3 See Robert Maranto, "[These Charter Schools Thrive on Competition](#)," *Houston Chronicle*, February 20, 2011.

4 Jean Johnson and John Immerwahr, *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools* (New York, NY: Public Agenda, 1994).

5 Of the eight cities we surveyed in March 2014, Denver public school parents were the most optimistic, with 63% of parents reporting that the schools were improving and 63% reporting a great deal or fair amount of trust in school system leaders.

6 Denver might be rare among big cities for its centrist education politics and muted race and class divisions. However, these circumstances might not have existed in the absence of exceptionally skillful and far-sighted reform leadership.

7 Students benefit from closures when they attend higher-performing schools. See Marisa de la Torre et al., *School Closings in Chicago: Understanding Families' Choices and Constraints for New School Enrollment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2015).

8 For an earlier but still highly relevant perspective on the politics of race in big-city education reform, see Jeffrey Henig et al., *The Color of School Reform: Race, Politics, and the Challenge of Urban Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); see in particular chapter 8, 273-292.

9 Blacks benefited tremendously from public sector employment because government was less likely to discriminate on the basis of race. See Jennifer Laird, "Still an Equal Opportunity Employer? Public Sector Inequality in the Wake of the Great Recession." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, San Diego, CA, April 2015.

10 Jeffrey Henig and Wilbur Rich, ed., *Mayors in the Middle: Politics, Race and Mayoral Control of Urban Schools* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

11 Jeffrey Henig, "Washington D.C.: Race, Issue Definition, and School Board Restructuring," in *Mayors in the Middle: Politics, Race, and Mayoral Control of Urban Schools*, ed. Jeffrey Henig and Wilbur Rich (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004): 204.

12 See Marion Orr, *Black Social Capital: The Politics of School Reform in Baltimore* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999).

13 Hispanic adults, particularly in border cities like Houston and Los Angeles, are often new arrivals in the country and have a great deal on their plates just finding work and keeping their families together. In the future, if not currently, they will become more available to coalition-makers on the pro- and anti-reform sides.

14 Henig et. al, *The Color of School Reform*, 276.

15 Minority parents appreciate having individuals from their own racial/ethnic groups in charge of the school districts or reform strategy, but identity does not guarantee support. Parents might be favorably inclined at first, but trust can be fleeting. They don't assume that minorities in high positions will inevitably care to work on disadvantaged children's behalf, or be able to keep the promises they make.

16 Given a normal 5% attrition rate, it's unlikely that many more pre-Katrina teachers would be working in the schools today, even had the mass firing not occurred. But it remains true that some pre-Katrina teachers have spent years out of work, and that the Recovery School District schools hired many teachers, mostly white, who were not from New Orleans. Reformers can't make local citizens forget the firings, but they could provide a more complete, and less damning, accounting of the facts.

17 Junior teachers are less likely to support collective bargaining provisions that favor the most experienced, and stand to benefit most if schools can consider performance rather than seniority in hiring and setting salaries. However, unionized teachers in general support the idea of collective bargaining in some form. See Terry M. Moe, *Special Interest: Teachers Unions and America's Public Schools* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011).

18 See Marguerite Roza, "Schools Are on Anything but a Level Playing Field," chap. 5 in *Educational Economics: Where Do School Funds Go?* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 2010).

19 Michael DeArmond et al., *Measuring Up: Educational Improvement and Opportunity in 50 Cities* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2015).

20 Henig et. al, *The Color of School Reform*, 278.

21 It is ironic that the chief opposition to Cami Anderson's OneNewark plan came from a mayoral candidate who nonetheless supported the removal of low-performing teachers and merit pay based on performance.

22 Patrick Sims and Vincent Rossmeier, *The State of Public Education in New Orleans: 10 Years After Hurricane Katrina* (New Orleans, LA: Cowen Institute, Tulane University, 2015).

23 In the case of Newark, most of the resources went to fund a teachers union contract that created new long-term burdens on the school system budget.

24 Henig et. al, *The Color of School Reform*, 279.

25 Daniel Bergner, "Class Warfare: Inside Eva Moskowitz's Battle with Mayor Bill de Blasio Over the Future of New York City Charter Schools," *New York Times Magazine*, Sept. 3, 2014.

26 Hill, Campbell, and Gross, *Strife and Progress*, chap. 7.

27 Reform supporters countered de Blasio by adding a new coalition partner of their own, New York governor Andrew Cuomo, who forced the mayor into a partial retreat.

28 Hill and Murtagh, *The Portfolio Strategy CEO*.

29 See Paul T. Hill and Ashley E. Jochim, *A Democratic Constitution for Public Education* (University of Chicago Press, 2015); see also, Kelly Hupfeld, *A State Legal Framework for Portfolio Districts*, Working Paper (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, December 2014). For information on this working paper, please email CRPE's policy director, [Jordan Posamentier](mailto:jordan.posamentier@crpe.org).